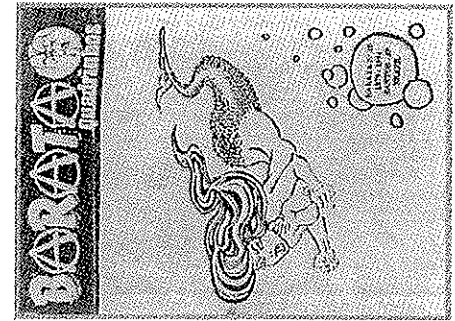
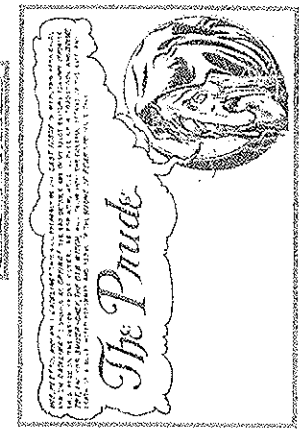
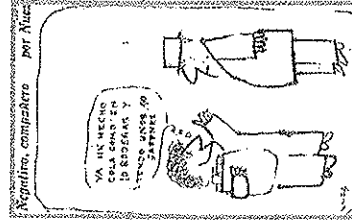
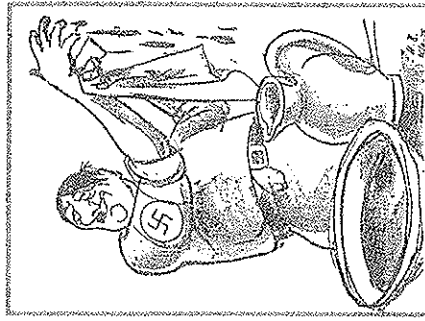
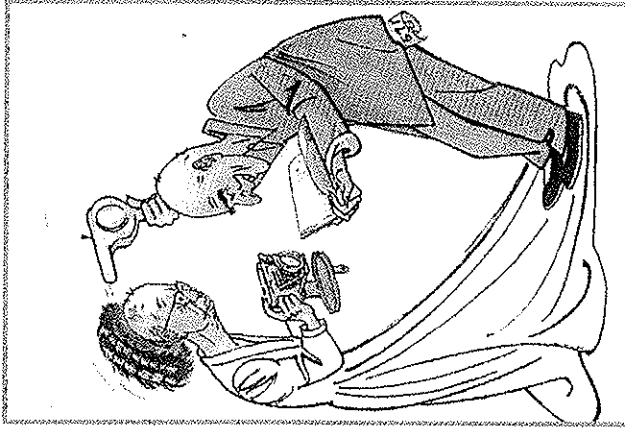


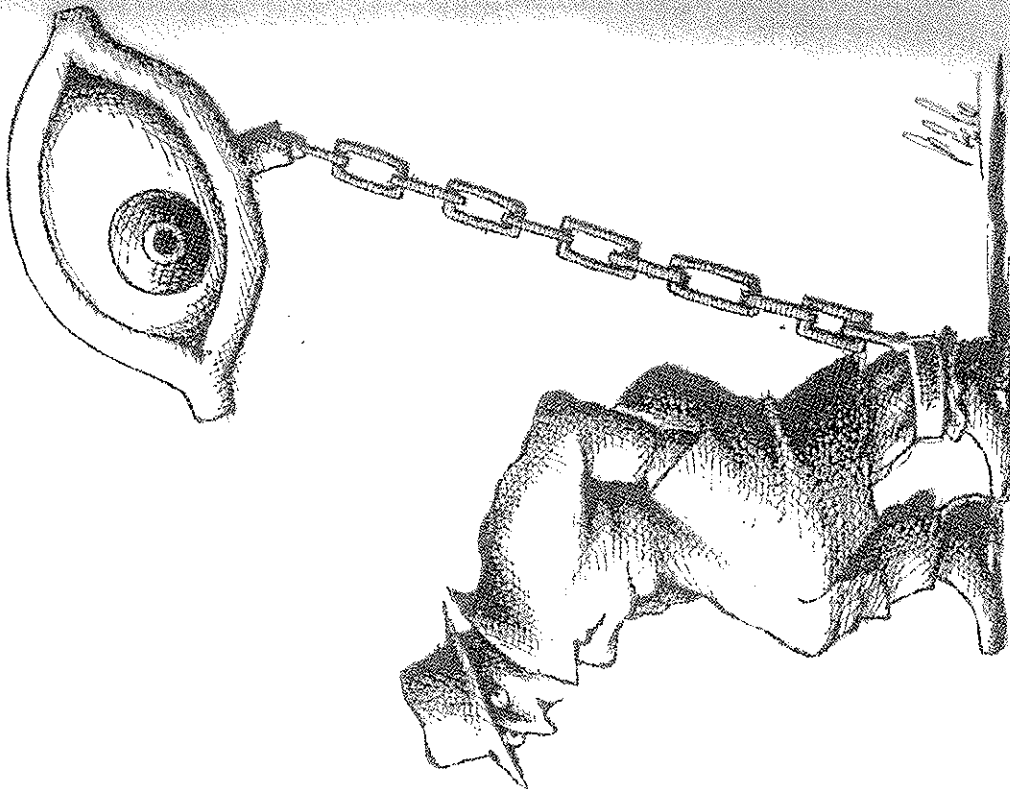
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF COMIC ART

Vol. 7, No. 2, Fall/Winter 2005



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF COMIC ART

Vol. 7, No. 2, Fall/Winter 2005



Mana Neyestany (Iran)

Fragmented Identity: The Superhero Condition

Julia Round

Horror and comic books have a long history. Up until the 1950s, many comic publishers were producing tales of "disemberment, corpses come back from the dead, and premature burials" (King, 1982:440), following EC Comics in the production of titles such as *Tales from the Crypt* and *The Vault of Terror*. The genre thrived, until parental outrage and a U.S. Senate investigation spawned the Comics Code: a set of industry-imposed guidelines that banned most of this material and is widely held responsible for the superhero monopoly of the industry that followed. But 50 years on, it seems that elements of the gothic still exist in contemporary comics, both thematically (in the notion of the superhero and his fragmented identity) and structurally, in the nesting of story arcs sustained by the multiple forms of trade paperback, graphic novel, and single issue. This article explores the lurking presence of the gothic in today's comics and considers the role of image and text in sustaining the gothic tradition, using as examples some of the comics published by DC's Vertigo imprint.

It seems appropriate to begin by briefly defining the gothic. A historicist approach argues that the gothic literary tradition sprung from an 18th Century architectural trend for the medieval. Parodic medievalism continued in its 19th Century literature, before the gothic resituated itself by moving to the subversive -- a trend that was continued by the decadent literature of the 1890s. Of these texts, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* led the way for an inwards turn in gothic literature that was aided culturally by the emergence and popularity of psychoanalysis.

Conversely, a cultural materialist approach (as seen in the work of Fred Botting or David Punter) situates the gothic tradition as a response to social trauma and consequently defines it as an overall tendency in literature rather than a historical genre (Punter, 1980:14). In so doing, these critics reconcile gothic's subversive elements and subcultural status with its canonical position, while still summarizing the dual impulse the gothic provokes historically, by identifying its turn from external horror (where the terror was objectified and cast out) to internal horror and related notions of guilt, anxiety, and despair. Again, this turn is linked to the Freudian school of psychoanalysis, which relocated horror inside the psyche.

In this way, many historicist and cultural materialist readings of the gothic are also underpinned by a psychoanalytic framework. Much contemporary criticism uses such a framework and views the movement from external to internal as an example of the gothic's theme of inversion, as the genre often links mutually opposing ideas such as decay versus growth and

fear versus attraction. Gothic themes such as these may be expressed as underlying messages or morals, as extended metaphors, or even by constitutive otherness -- in itself, also an example of the kind of inversion gothic relies upon, where what is *not* said and *not* present nonetheless defines a work. These principles affect both the structuring and content of gothic fiction.

Many of these key elements and movements within the gothic tradition are reflected in the Vertigo comics, both structurally and thematically. By linking semiotics to gothic themes, we can perceive a kind of gothic structuring within the comic book medium that presents its narrative in a non-linear form where all moments coexist on the page. Similarly, the subcultural status of contemporary comics aligns with that of the gothic, while Sigmund Freud's identification of pop culture as the most fruitful area for psychoanalytic investigation (Massé, 2001:229) supports the validity of such an approach. The gothic's absorption of other genres is also echoed by the development of the American comic book industry through what I call "superscription" -- the overwriting and adaptation of previously existing characters. Thematically, and most obviously in the *Vertigo* comics, gothic notions of isolation and cultural anxiety are reflected in the content. Within the comic book superhero, notions of fragmented identity and alter egos abound, literally reflecting the gothic "other within," and I turn now to a closer consideration of these elements.

Gothic Structure

Structural multiplicity is a defining feature of the gothic tradition, for example as in *Dracula*'s reliance "on a multiplicity of texts and of points of view" or the use of a "traditional structure of embedded narratives" (Lecerle, 2001:72) in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The gothic formula of stories-within-stories is the basis of Jody Castricano's cryptomimetic structure and invokes Jacques Derrida's notion of the crypt as "a place comprehended within another but rigorously separate from it... scaled, and thus internal to itself" (Derrida, 1986:xiv). Gothic texts also draw attention to their performative structuring by using extratextual markers claiming antiquity and authenticity. The resulting structure is performative not only by using this process to create its own authenticity (whether this is believed or disbelieved), but further because it is only through this process that the question is ever raised.

Worlds' End, the eighth trade paperback in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series, makes extensive use of this sort of gothic structuring and in so doing, stretches the potential of comic book language. Similar to works such as *The Canterbury Tales*, the main story is set at an inn where travellers from many different fantasy worlds are sheltering from a "reality storm" and while away the time by each telling a story in their turn, many of which incorporate other tales,

locations, and times. In this sense the convoluted narrative framework of *Worlds'* End uses and exploits the reader's suspension of disbelief in a manner peculiar to the gothic -- a kind of "double" suspension, where the readers must not only permit themselves to believe in fictional characters and settings as "real," but also suspend their disbelief with regard to the laws of nature, as the supernatural is invoked and exploited. It is interesting to note that the non-realistic style of comic book art also requires a similar suspension of disbelief from the reader in order that people, scenes, and objects may be read and recognized as "real."

The nature of the comic book medium allows it many methods of expressing division and sustaining a complicated narrative structure. *Worlds'* End is composed of six comic books, the content of each being the telling of a new tale framed by the setting of the inn. Artist Brian Talbot drew all these framing sequences while a different artist was assigned to each new tale. By electing to do this, Gaiman allows the pictorial element of his signifiers to distinguish each new story, ensuring that the flow of the trade paperback's story arc is less obtrusively interrupted than it would be by the use of devices such as titles to indicate the start of each new tale.



Fig. 1. Framing device to divide story also references content in its ornate style. Extract from "Cerements," p19, panel 6. Neil Gaiman (writer), Shea Anton Pensa and Vince Locke (artists). © DC Comics 1994.

The medium's hybrid structure has a myriad of techniques at its disposal, enabling it to introduce different story layers without narrative disruption. While strategies such as colored text are fairly simplistic methods of enabling multiple narrative voices, within the layout of the page (or metapanel) the possibilities for positioning are much more exciting. These visual strategies allow the narrative to sustain contradictions and interruptions -- even a leap between layers of story for just a single panel -- and include the use of ornate framing devices (Fig. 1); inset panels; the signifying possibilities of panel shape, size, and color (Fig. 2); or the opportunities for juxtaposition -- whether by using adjacent panels (Fig. 3), or in the creation of patterning or syntagmatic reading possibilities.

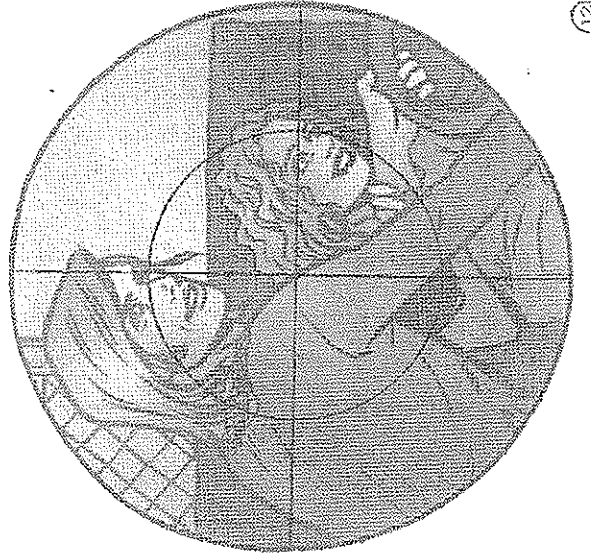


Fig. 2. Color and shape of panel signifies content. Extract from "The Golden Boy," p12, panel 7. Neil Gaiman (writer), Michael Allred (artist). © DC Comics 1994.

It is interesting to note that while many of the strategies used in these comics (such as colored or stylized text) are also available to prose narrative, these seldom feature in mainstream publications. Although economic factors are at play, the lack of such diversity in contemporary prose publishing seems odd in light of the technological advances made and the opportunities now available. The same strategies are being used and reused: as evidenced by concrete poems such as Lewis Carroll's "Mouse's tale" and equivalent uses of shaped paragraphs by contemporary writers such as Irvine Welsh.

But just as visual techniques are used in these novels, prose narrative techniques are also used within the comic book, for example, in the use of

ellipses to evoke suspense. Similarly, each new tale within *Worlds' End* begins with a return to the inn, providing an essential base (due to the serialized nature of the single issue form the story was originally released in). It can therefore be argued that the comic book medium must rely upon similar divisional techniques to the novel in order to sustain a gothic structure. However, it seems that this technique is less essential to the coherence of the story so much as it is conventional, or simply dictated by the single-issue form. This is evidenced by the simultaneous presence of an overarching, subsuming, gothic-style story arc within the trade paperback.

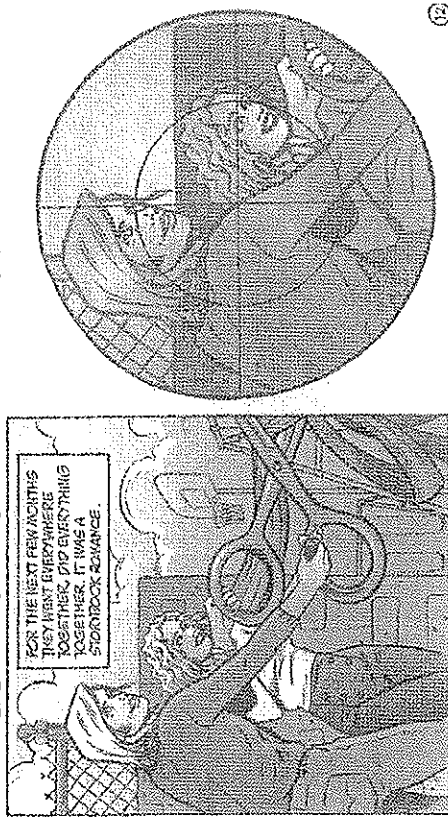


Fig. 3. Juxtaposition of adjacent panels to signify story content. Extract from "The Golden Boy," p12, panels 6-7. Neil Gaiman (writer), Michael Allred (artist). © DC Comics 1994.

In light of these examples, it is clear that both the novel and the comic are capable of sustaining complicated structures with minimal disruption. What is more interesting is the resistance to this seen in both mediums, where vast potential is barely used. As seen, many of the textual tricks used by *Worlds' End* could be used within the contemporary novel, which nonetheless rejects these in favor of a more traditional narrative. In this way, the use of text and image in comics draws attention to the assumptions that may be made by writers regarding their limitations. The many narrative elements that the comic book medium has at its disposal would seem to testify to the supplementary nature of its use of color and framing techniques -- and so perhaps their inclusion serves another purpose: sustaining the gothic tradition.

Superscription and Absorption

I'd like to turn now to the idea of absorption and rewriting as seen in

both the gothic and comic books. The Swamp Thing, a man turned plant-creature, first appeared in the DC anthology series *House of Secrets* #92 (September 1971) in a one-off story written by Len Wein and illustrated by Bernie Wrightson. The story was a hit and, in 1972, the character was given his own title, which ran until 1976. This series also established his "origin story": the tale of Alec Holland, a scientist working out in the marshes on a regenerative formula for plants who was literally blown to bits when foreign agents bombed his laboratory. Holland, his formula, and the surrounding swampland merged, creating the Swamp Thing -- a mass of vegetable matter with the consciousness and memories of a man.

The series was revived in 1982 as *Saga of the Swamp Thing* and writer Alan Moore took over the scripting with issue 20, soon to be joined by illustrators Steve Bissette and John Totleben. One of the six core titles that was later to form the basis of the Vertigo line, Moore's rewriting of *Swamp Thing* changed the original horror story into something more by incorporating mythology, social concerns, philosophy, and one of the strangest love stories to appear in mainstream comics. The characters he revived and recreated live on in many contemporary Vertigo titles and I propose now to examine the effects of this "superscription" -- that is, the overwriting of superhero characters.

The Swamp Thing himself was modelled on an earlier character called The Heap, but whereas both this original figure and the 1970s' Swamp Thing remained freak individuals, Moore redefined his 1980s' version as a "plant elemental": a god-like being literally made of plant matter who can regenerate at will and "grow" a body from any living matter, anywhere. In *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #47 ("The Parliament of Trees") the creature discovers the resting place of the elementals that came before him and Moore gives each of these the identities of Swamp Thing's previous incarnations, such as scientist Alex Olsen (the alter ego of the 1970s' Swamp Thing) and pilot Albert Höllerer (the original identity of The Heap).

This combination of the old and the new reflects the gothic tradition's incorporation and alteration of other genres, and this movement is continued by many of the Vertigo texts, such as *The Sandman*, Neil Gaiman's epic series that tells the story of Dream of the Endless. Like *Saga of the Swamp Thing*, *The Sandman* uses intertextuality in a completely different way to the industry's usual practice. Normally, "schisms" are inserted into a long-running character's history to expunge contradictory past events, generally by using devices such as alternate worlds. In this way characters are redefined every so often, and a coherent history for them is constructed. However, Gaiman instead incorporates his Dream character into the histories of previously used characters: for example the storytellers Cain and Abel, who reside with Dream and are keepers of mysteries and secrets, respectively.

Both characters hosted various DC horror comics in the 1970s: Cain in

fact hosted the series *House of Mystery* while Abel hosted *House of Secrets*. Within the fiction of *The Sandman*, Dream approached these characters after their (biblical) deaths and offered them the chance to live in *The Dreaming* and tell stories. By sticking closely to their original appearances and roles as "storytellers," Gaiman is able to redefine these characters and imply that their 1970s' horror comics were told from *The Dreaming*. In this way he utilizes the comics industry to provide a history for and lend credibility to *The Sandman*.

A similar process is observable in the character of Etrigan and his human alter ego Jason Blood -- a Jack Kirby creation that was also revived by Alan Moore in *Saga of the Swamp Thing* and has since been overwritten still further in various Vertigo titles. The demon Etrigan is a prince of Hell who was bound by the wizard Merlin to a knight named Jason. To this day, Etrigan remains caged inside Jason (who is immortal due to the bond between them) and torments him psychologically, although a spoken chant can release him into our world while Jason switches places with him in Hell.

Kirby's original interpretation of the demon was as a force of good, loyally serving Merlin. However, in *Swamp Thing*, Moore superscribed Etrigan as an amoral, vicious demon tied to an innocent man and, when John Byrne wished to return Etrigan to Kirby's original specifications for *Action Comics* #587 (April 1987), this needed a printed explanation. In this sense, Moore rewrote an (admittedly somewhat strange) Kirby superhero into a reversal of the alter ego/hero theme: that of alter ego/demon. This inversion of the superhero set the foundations for a darker tone and it was Moore's interpretation that Garth Ennis and Neil Gaiman continued in *The Demon* and *The Sandman*, respectively. By collectively discarding Byrne's explanatory rewriting in favor of this interpretation, Vertigo was beginning to form its own distinct universe of characters, and to redefine the superhero as a gothic motif.

Gothic Themes

The superhero was given its most definitive and experimental mainstream rewriting in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' 1986-7 series *Watchmen*, which focuses on the defunct role of superheroes in modern society and can be read as an extended metaphor for the failure of the comics industry to grow with and sustain this genre.

The idea of "masks" is a frequent motif in Moore's dialogue: for example, the character Rorschach consistently refers to his mask as his "face" or "skin", saying that he "became myself" in wearing it (Moore 1987: V.11, V.18¹). But Moore defines the motif still further when, speaking of the superhero known as the Comedian, he writes "...HE WAS DRUNK. HAD HIS MASK OFF. THE GUY WAS SCARED OF SOMETHING..." (II.21). The link between not wearing

a mask and showing fear elevates the mask motif to something metaphorical: a symbol of power. This meaning is further reinforced when, after an abortive first attempt, Dan Dreiberger/Nite Owl and Laurie Juspeck/Silk Spectre II then find themselves able to successfully make love once wearing their costumes (VII.27).

In *Watchmen*, the costumes and masks are the key to the superhero conundrum: as they are, quite literally "ALL THAT'S NECESSARY...ALL I NEED" (X.9) to become a superhero. They represent internal power (as in Rorschach's "face"), while simultaneously functioning as an external disguise, calling to mind the associated gothic themes of isolation and the internal versus external.

In *The Sandman* #20 ("Façade") Neil Gaiman continues these themes, reviving Element Girl, a 1960s' DC superhero and sidekick to the character Metamorpho. Her alter ego, Rainie Blackwell, worked for US intelligence until she volunteered to be exposed to radiation from a meteor. The radiation gave her the ability to transform her body into any substance or shape but also changed it permanently into something non-human in both color and composition. Gaiman picks up the character decades later to show us an agoraphobic Rainie who has been pensioned off and lives isolated in her apartment.

The comic is full of mask references: expressions like "PUT ON A BRAVE FACE" (Gaiman, 1991: IV.4) are used frequently and Rainie's apartment is littered with her cast-off silicon masks. These seem devoid of all power as she uses them purely as a shield or disguise. By continuing to read the mask motif as representing both power and disguise, we can see Gaiman thematically exploring the end of a superhero life, where power is worthless and the masks themselves have quite literally become empty, useless shells.

Although most obviously present thematically (in her agoraphobia), Rainie's isolation is also emphasized visually: the regular arrangement and size of the panels that introduce and depict her apartment (IV.1) signify the routine of her small, small world. Also on this page, the positioning of the narrative boxes is reminiscent of dialogic speech bubbles, emphasizing their absence in this way and defining her isolation through *what it is not*. This constitutive otherness again calls to mind the conflict between the internal and external, and Gaiman uses other visual techniques to further emphasize this point, for example when we zoom in to focus on Rainie sitting alone (Fig. 4). As her face enlarges, attention is drawn to the unusual colors used and soon it feels as if we are no longer viewing her exterior but her interior, unmasked state.

These uses of the mask motif reveal the gothic notion of fragmented identity at the basis of the superhero genre. The genre's reliance on multiple identities and alter egos not only represents the existence of such plural possibilities within an individual and the sustenance of the multiple by the

postmodern, but can also be read as an example of constitutive otherness, where marginalized elements define the text and apparent unity is maintained only by processes of exclusion and opposition. In comics, the alter ego is often directly opposed to the superhero identity -- as evidenced by the mild-mannered Clark Kent versus the powerful Superman; or the timid Peter Parker versus the brash Spider-Man, and, in this sense, the two halves define each other. A gothic fragmentation of identity is at the basis of this, the superhero condition.

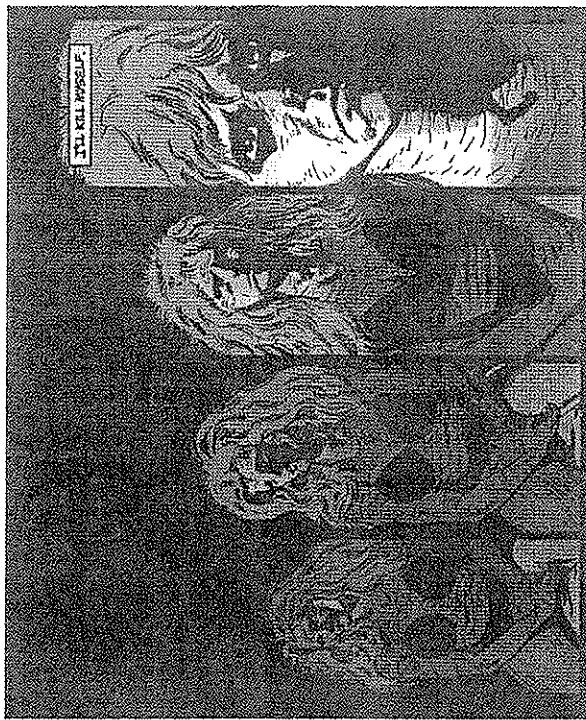


Fig. 4. Blurring the internal/external. Extract from "Façade," p14, panels 1-4. Neil Gaiman (writer), Colleen Doran and Malcolm Jones III (artists). © DC Comics 1990.

Not only does this idea relate to the concept of constitutive otherness, it can be further explored with reference to psychological criticism, such as the work of Alfred Adler and notions of organ inferiority. To summarize briefly, Adler theorized that personality may be best understood as the physical tool used in striving for the goal of power. To this end, it is constructed to conceal inferiorities, as illustrated by organ inferiority complex, i.e. children who have locomotion difficulties "construct an ideal for themselves that is permeated by power and speed" (Adler, 1992:47). Adler further extends this idea to the psyche, commenting that: "The goal of superiority is a secret goal. The presence of social feeling prevents it from appearing overtly -- it grows in secret and hides behind an acceptable façade" (138).

In the context of literature, this idea is illustrated by the macho Byronic personality that stood in contrast to Lord Byron's real-life physical flaws, or

the lusty poetry of Yeats versus his bloodless personality. Understanding personality as constructed around flaws, as the antithesis of "real" character, suggests a new approach to the superhero/alter ego divide, allowing us to understand these conflicting entities as part of a single psyche, embodied in one person, however tremulously. This is further echoed by the superhero's perpetual fear that his/her alter ego will be exposed and in this sense Adler's psychoanalytic framework supports a reading of the superhero as a postmodern gothic symbol of fragmented identity.

This view of personality as constructed from multiple, coexistent identities² also features in the psychoanalytic models of Freud and Jung and is applicable to the superhero motif, where neither "Peter Parker" nor "Spider-Man" accurately reflects the "whole," complete person. This notion of construction is pivotal to the work of C.G. Jung, specifically in his notion of the "persona" as a mask that is formed during the civilization process to hide negative character traits/the unconscious. It is also essential to Jung's theories of "individuation" (the lifelong quest for a wholeness which can only be achieved through forging a link between the consciousness and unconsciousness), which process is the central concept of Jung's psychology.

Jung's analytical psychology shares many elements with Freud and Adler's frameworks; however, his theories of the extrovert and introvert alert us to an important distinction in this regard. Whereas Freud's psychoanalytic framework is based around the *external* frustration of the infant sexual impulse, Adler's theories of individual psychology revolve around the *internal* drive for power (Fordham, 1966:84). As mentioned, the gothic sustains a similar division and this is further reflected in the various, multiple portrayals of the modern superhero.

The climax of Alan Moore's Batman comic *The Killing Joke* is set at a deserted funfair, where the Joker has created a ghost train designed to drive Commissioner Gordon insane. Here, the motifs of "doors" and "trains" operate in a literal sense within the story as well as in the metaphorical sense that the Joker's speech intends as he says: "SO WHEN YOU FIND YOURSELF LOCKED ONTO AN UNPLEASANT TRAIN OF THOUGHT...MADNESS IS THE EMERGENCY EXIT...YOU CAN JUST STEP OUTSIDE, AND CLOSE THE DOOR ON ALL THOSE THINGS THAT HAPPENED." (Moore, 1988a:npag).

This internal/external divide again illustrates a gothic inversion linked to psychoanalysis. Although a patient's avoidance or refusal to discuss trauma may lead a psychologist to hypothesize about repression, this can only be confirmed once the blocked memories resurface. Similarly, memories that are cherished as deeply internal and personal can also be defined as only the effect of external influences. The Joker's speech questions the divide between the internal and external, reversing these notions -- madness is described as "THE EMERGENCY EXIT" and leads "OUTSIDE," whereas the "DREADFUL

THINGS THAT HAPPENED" (i.e. external events) are positioned inside the metaphorical ghost train. In this way, the psychological model of fragmented identity that is the superhero condition is linked to the gothic themes of internal versus external, and inversion.

By following in the footsteps of Alan Moore, it seems that elements of many gothic strategies and themes have culminated in the Vertigo texts, which variously refer to and employ notions of absorption, subculture, isolation, fragmented identity, and inversion. Both structural and thematic inversions abound in these comics, the most important of which can be best understood in the context of the superhero. As established, the superhero motif is itself representative of a model of identity that is inherently fragmented and invites psychological criticism. In this sense, every superhero may be read as a gothic motif, representing themes of isolation and the internal/external divide. However, the structure and visual elements of the Vertigo texts redefine this motif, pushing it even further towards the gothic. Similarly, their content frequently and effortlessly inverts the superhero/alter ego convention and echoes the gothic tradition in this turn towards the notion of horror within.

Endnotes

¹ For ease of reference, my citations from trade paperbacks take this form, where V.18 refers to Part V, page 18.

² As inherent to the construction of the self (Adler, Jung), rather than referring to a personality disorder such as Dissociative Identity Disorder (previously called Multiple Personality Disorder).

References

- Abraham, N. and Maria Torok. 1986. *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Adler, A. 1992. *Understanding Human Nature*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications Ltd.
- Botting, F., ed. 2001. *The Gothic*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.
- Castricano, J. 2001. *Cryptomimesis*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Derrida, J. 1986. "Fors: The English Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok." In Abraham and Torok, xi-xlviii.
- Fordham, F. 1966. *An Introduction to Jung's Psychology*. Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Gaiman, N., Kelley Jones, Charles Vess, Colleen Doran and Malcolm Jones III. 1991. *The Sandman: Dream Country*, 17-20. New York: DC Comics

Inc.

Gaiman, N., Michael Allred, Gary Amaro, Mark Buckingham, Dick Giordano, Tony Harris, Steve Leialoha, Vince Locke, Shea Anton Pensa, Alec Stevens, Bryan Talbot, John Watkiss and Michael Zulli. 1994. *The Sandman: Worlds' End*, 51-56. New York: DC Comics Inc.

King, S. 1982. *Danse Macabre*. London: Futura.

Lecerche, J. 2001. "The Kitten's Nose: Dracula and Witchcraft." In Botting, 71-86.

Massé, M.A. 2001. "Psychoanalysis and the Gothic." In Punter, 229-241.

Moore, A. and Dave Gibbons. 1987. *Watchmen*, 1-12. London: Titan Books Limited.

Moore, A. and Brian Bolland. 1988a. *Batman: The Killing Joke*. London: Titan Books Limited.

Moore, A., Steve Bissette, John Totleben and Stan Woch. 1988b. *Swamp Thing Volume Seven*, 45-47. London: Titan Books Limited.

Punter, D. 1980. *The Literature of Terror A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*. London: Longman Group Limited.

Punter, D., ed. 2001. *A Companion to the Gothic*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Limited.

Julia Round is a Ph.D. student in the English Literature Department at Bristol University, England, researching the launch and first decade of the DC Vertigo imprint. Her dissertation discusses how changes within the authorship, reading practices, and criticism of contemporary American comics can alert us to more general questions raised by the inclusion of popular culture in literature.